

— ANOTHER'S FOOL —

Steven Key Meyers

Troilus: You cannot shun yourself.

Cressida: Let me go and try.
I have a kind of self resides
with you,
But an unkind self that
itself will leave
to be another's fool.

—Shakespeare,
*Troilus and
Cressida*

1.

AS THEY ROLLED through the tunnel, a dark man of mystery was blowing frost at Bruce through glass iced with cigarette smoke. Harlem's daylight made him a ghost, but his hollow cheeks and uneasy expression haunted him over Westchester's snowy ground. *The hell he want?*

Bruce would have preferred staying in the city that January morning. Mondays tended to be a victory lap at Nikolodimsky Concert Management, low-key and satisfying after the hectic week and weekend. Telephones rang with clients calling in grosses and audience counts, and Western Union messengers brought more, while Bruce and his colleagues charted, kibitzed, gossiped, analyzed reviews, congratulated or consoled one another, generally caught up with how they were doing on their mission of bringing classical music to the masses.

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David had called him at their apartment in Greenwich Village the night before, and the news as usual was good: an SRO house in Des Moines Saturday night, his Dvořák and Rachmaninoff applauded to the rafters, at Sunday's recital four encores demanded. No surprise: David Spegall was a genius and a star.

Acute, too—asked if everything was OK, and it was all Bruce could do to persuade him that yeah, sure, everything was fine, no trouble in Paradise or any place else. In fact, Bruce wasn't sure he bought it.

Though he could usually fool David—only when it was best for him, of course—the last thing on Earth Bruce thought himself capable of was fooling *himself*. He knew he was rather a shit; young people often have to be, he reasoned, having their way to make in a world not very welcoming to them. Never as bad as some might claim; still, definitely a shit. Worst was the jealousy of his own lover that was constantly eating him up. What it drove him to, especially with David's obliviousness!

When the train slowed and the conductor came through calling "*Katonah! Katonah!*" Bruce pulled himself to his feet and, rudely reminded of his shoulder, stepped off into the cold air and looked around for a taxicab. He'd not before been to this northern Westchester village, summer and weekend redoubt of horse-loving financiers. Opposite the station stood a block of old-fashioned storefronts.

"Mr. Harnes!" a voice called peremptorily, the misplaced stress making of the name an item of riding tack.

Bruce focused on a big, wide-faced chauffeur his age in pearl-buttoned moleskin livery that hinted at brutality; in another context he might have looked twice. He was holding open the rear door to a cream-and-black Cadillac limousine, one of those early 1950s behemoths gnashing twin chrome incisors in its grille, projections shaped like artillery shells. The custom padded roof, half a foot higher than usual, meant Bruce didn't have to stoop getting in. As he was to find in a few minutes, Mrs. Berlin was herself tall and regal.

His boss had called him in as soon as Bruce got to the office that morning, for all that he was, on purpose, early. Mr. Nikolodimsky was earlier still. But then, that Russian-born force of nature who pulled the strings of American high culture, dedicating his whole intense being to music and ballet, did nothing but work. Since emerging from obscurity after the Bolshevik Revolution, Nickel-and-dime (his employees' mostly fond nickname, Aleksandre Michaelovitch Nikolodimsky being a mouthful) had become a principality unto himself, dealing with governments as their equal to pull off such coups as bringing the Bolshoi Ballet to America. Many days East-West relations seemed centered in his office as he worked to draw artists West from behind the Iron Curtain and to send his adopted country's best to the East. His taste was informed, catholic and more welcoming to the new than the American public's, which he privately characterized as having the hardened arteries of the Old Regime. And did he make a good thing of it? Oh, yes: Lived

like a count on Park Avenue and in Old Westbury.

"Mrs. Dora Berlin," he pronounced, lounging against his chairback as cars honked ten stories below on 57th Street. "Ring a bell?"

Bruce hesitated. "Didn't her husband die?"

"Year before last," confirmed Nickel-and-dime. Max Berlin, eminent Wall Streeter, art collector and amateur pianist; an Arnold Genthe portrait had garnished his *Times* obituary, index finger propping up a marble cheek burnished to wait out eternity. He had occasionally booked artists from the Nikolodimsky roster to perform at private musicales at his town or country places. "Well, Mrs. Berlin has an idea. Told her you'd go out to Katonah and talk to her. She'll give you lunch. There's a train in" — he shot a look at the Richard Street longcase clock — "35 minutes."

"Yes, sir," Bruce said.

"Call from there," Nikolodimsky added. "And don't mention your—weekend. Grandsons, young boys."

Hence rattling out of town in the smoking car and now riding in a limousine whose interior was tufted like a casket's. What was the wily Russian up to, Bruce wondered? Firing him?

He'd counted on his not finding out about his disastrous Saturday night, but clearly he knew all about it. How? But information being his lifeblood, why wouldn't Nikolodimsky have informants in the NYPD just as at the State Department and Soviet Embassy and every known security apparatus? Through Cadillac windows Bruce surveyed the world

quite possibly a ruined man.

Of course he attended his quartet's New York debut Saturday at the Carnegie Lyceum. Penguins swaying in unison, they played their Haydn and Schumann beautifully. He'd called over to the *Herald Tribune* and *Times* and confirmed that critics, if of the third rank, would be in attendance, which meant short notices appearing on Tuesday. So much to the good, since with the Enlightenment's performance there was no question any reviews would be positive, despite the tendency of critics (third-string ones especially) to pull at some extraneous loose thread and carp on it in a desperate *look at me*.

Afterwards he took them next door to the Russian Tea Room for a celebratory toast (not supper), before returning downtown by subway. Columns flashing past like sprockets on a film reel brought the evening's drama to a close.

On his way home to the Bleecker Street apartment he shared with David, Bruce stepped into a bar on Sheridan Square. The Minstrel Man was a quiet place, more given to conversation than your average Village watering hole. It was still early when he took his seat at the end of the bar—midnight was the witching hour. Smoking, sipping Scotch, he ignored his surroundings, a man of mystery in black tie, handsome (if you say so), all cheekbones and hooded eyes. Men in suits pressing inside, the bar gradually filled up with a clientele, if not exactly genteel, certainly a cut above.

Bruce was halfway through a second drink and, spiderlike, sensing his prey about to strike—some

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predator brave enough to try to penetrate his mystery, shortly to discover himself ensnared in Bruce's web—when loud and fast there came, *"Against the wall, you fucking cocksuckers!"* and *"Move it, ladies!"* and *"Raid!"*

His first raid, first arrest. The persuasive effect he had on people—fed by his conviction that everything in life is negotiable, *everything*—held no sway at *"Raid!"* When cops charged in flailing batons, nothing Bruce could say differentiated him from anyone else. And set aside any repercussions with Nickel-and-dime, his relationship with David was not supposed to extend to meeting men in bars.

The cops corralled them into black marias, a gratuitous blow crushing Bruce's shoulder; fortunately he no longer played but for his own amusement. Downtown at The Tombs they jammed their catch into one big, stinking cell awash with vomit and crowded with a Saturday night assortment of drunks and muggers who found sport in taunting them. The next morning, no one having slept a wink, they were released—photographed, fingerprinted and given desk appearance tickets for disorderly conduct; left to find their way home on the Sabbath in soiled Saturday night garb. Such were the tactics of 1953: wholesale scoopings-up of homosexuals who forever after had police records, with whatever that might mean in job or relationship troubles. They were favorite scapegoats for a society filled with fear.

Why the fear? Having helped win a world war against tyranny, the U.S. was prospering as never before. So why hysteria about Communism, when it

could make no inroads in a society getting rich on capitalism? Why the obsession with men who liked men, police raids wherever they gathered? Don't ask Bruce!

He went into work that morning hoping he bore no mark or taint, aside from his invisibly aching shoulder, but Nickel-and-dime's cultivated basso had called him into his office and put him on his train.

The limousine swam down narrow curving roads. Out here the snow looked deep. The houses they passed ranged from large to larger to invisible, which meant enormous. The trees were mostly softwoods; formerly dairy country, Bruce wondered? They turned into a lane, passed two antique barns, crossed an arched stone bridge—and entered a magical realm. For all that it was January, Bruce could tell he was in a manicured garden precinct, its outskirts a village of stucco cottages, farther on a sprawling stucco mansion sprouting a dozen fanciful chimneys from red-tile roofs. This was the back way onto Ca'Dora, Mrs. Berlin's place.

Going through a pergola entwined with leafless wisteria, they pulled up at a marble balustrade near the long vine-covered front. Beyond were snowy lawns and hedges.

"Thank you," Bruce said when the chauffeur came round and opened his door. Ignoring his possibly meaning smile, he walked to the cast-stone archway that broke the façade, was just reaching for a bell-pull beside the wrought-iron gates when a silver-haired butler stepped out of the house.

"Welcome, Mr. Harnes," he said, his emphasis

correct. Clanging shut the gate behind Bruce, with a bow he opened a door. Bruce had just time to cast a glance over the arcades of a large flagged courtyard before entering a most pleasant sitting room. "Hat and coat, sir?"

The butler carried them away, leaving Bruce to inspect over the fire a glittering view in oils of, as he later learned, the ballroom of London's bombed-out Halliwith House, one of Mrs. Berlin's girlhood homes. Precious objects in bronze, jade, cloisonné enamel, Italian majolica and Ch'ien-lung porcelain surrounded him, and layers of fabric enwrapped him: needlepoint upholstery, silk brocade on the walls, on the floor a fine Bokhara.

There was a step, and into the room wearing tailored tweeds and carrying a riding crop came a handsome, imposing woman who appeared younger than the mid-fifties Bruce knew she was.

"Mr. Harnes? Dora Berlin. "So good of you to come all this way."

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2.

THAT AFTERNOON MRS. BERLIN dropped Bruce at Carnegie Hall, opposite Nickel-and-dime's offices.

Her limousine growled off, a whale among minnows. The overcast was so pronounced that, at not 4:00 o'clock, lights were coming on. But there's glamour to New York's early winter dusk, the city's nerves and energies throbbing as people stride onto the pavements eager to get on with it. Pulling his fedora low so as not to meet some man's gaze or brush his knuckles and reflexively end up in his bed—there was no time!—Bruce crossed the street and, nodding at the doorman, entered the building.

The grimy brown brick tower, a mixture of studios and offices, was dedicated to the music trade. At any hour one could hear expert touches on piano or violin; the office game was to guess who was working where: Firkušný, Rubinstein, Horowitz? Heifetz, Zimbalist, Menuhin? A baritone was vocalizing as Bruce waited for the elevator. Robert Merrill?

When he'd telephoned from the country, Sophie,

Nikolodimsky's secretary, had him hold the line while their boss railed away in Russian from his supposedly sound-proofed office, whether at his wife about dinner or at the Soviet Ambassador—quite possibly in person—about getting an exit permit for an artist he wished to present.

Finally the savagery ceased and Sophie connected them.

"Well?" It came out *Vell*? "How do you find our lady friend?"

"Very nice. She fed me well and now she's showing me around."

"And?"

"Ambitious plans, and no time to spare. But I told her I'd do it."

"Goot!"

"Look, Mr. Nikolodimsky, I'm going to Chicago tonight to break it to David. Back Thursday—working lunch with Mrs. Berlin."

"David? Goot!" House policy required that client-management changes be made face-to-face, for, as Nickel-and-dime put it, "Music is *people*, and people you treat with *respect*." His other clients happening to be in town, Bruce could deal with them on his return. Another house policy—the generous expense accounts that allowed him to travel first-class, the better to bolster the prestige of the arts—would make the round-trip bearable. "Train's at five? Come in before."

David. They'd been together five years, and Bruce was in love with him still. David Spegall was handsome and supremely talented; Bruce *had* to love

him, even if, loving him, he was tied down, domestic, not himself, living a persona which, however pleasing, wasn't his—and with jealousy decreeing he forever had to hear *You're not good enough!* (Not that David would dream of saying such a thing.) But now Mrs. Berlin proposed hiring him to start a summer music festival at Ca'Dora and Bruce could no longer manage David's career. Someone else had to take over; Bruce had to set his lover free.

That he felt glee in doing so reminded him of what a shit he was.

A music festival outdoors on a great estate! So much to do! Dates; programs; artists; publicity. Parking! My God, *chairs!* My God, what if it *rained?*

And so little time! But he was thrilled, gone from fearing he'd lost his job (though apparently he had) to having a niche of his own in the music world.

The usual progress of a career at Nickel-and-dime's was glacially slow. Bruce personally managed two pianists—David one of them—plus the Enlightenment Quartet, a cellist, a flautist, a fiddler, a chorus and two conductors: Booked their appearances and negotiated their fees, collected commissions, wrote program notes, arranged interviews, under their by-lines ghost-wrote articles for the music press (*On First Hearing Delius; The Best Advice Toscanini Ever Gave Me*), advised on repertoire, attended recording sessions, even posed them at keyboard or music stand and photographed them, and all for a pittance.

And this he'd been doing since being hired out of the Juilliard School of Music three years earlier with bachelor's and master's degrees in music criticism—

hired at David's behest—with every prospect of continuing for another thirty or forty years. Counting on promotion, much less succession, was pie-in-the-sky; though he'd been around forever, Nickel-and-dime was by no means elderly.

So Bruce couldn't pass up Mrs. Berlin's offer. Founding a festival? He could do that!

Nickel-and-dime's corner office was a two-story former studio paneled in walnut. Behind his desk clocks displayed the time across North America and in London, Paris and Moscow, and antique Long Island weathervanes from his collection studded the wall opposite. The grandfather clock, lacquered in *chinoiserie*, shaded the passing seconds into majestic *ticks* and *ticks*.

As Bruce went in, his boss was sitting silent and still as the Buddha across from two visitors in gray suits, white shirts, dark ties whose heads snapped towards him in tandem. They stood up menacingly. Crew-cuts made their faces those of boys. One had the physique of Bruce's father, the All-American fullback. The other was slender and willowy. The first was somewhat older than himself, the second younger.

"Ah, here's Mr. Harnes," said Nickel-and-dime, remaining seated. "Bruce, these gentlemen are from the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

The elder—Special Agent Nolan—grabbed Bruce's fingers, his jaw telegraphing his intention of crushing them, but pianists have strong hands; Bruce was gratified to make him wince. The blond offered his hand gravely, and he pressed it with equal gravity.

Palm and fingers were warm, his eyes enormous; Bruce rather fell in. His name was Phil Goddard. It surprised him to find a fairy among the G-men.

"I told them you're going to help Mrs. Berlin stage her music festival. Am I correct?"

"Yes, and about that, Mr. Nikolodimsky — forgive me, gentlemen, but I have a train to catch — I want David Spegall as Music Director."

"*David Spegall!* Get out of here!"

"No, sir: I need him. Can offer a very good fee."

"Listen to yourself!" Nikolodimsky exclaimed in a way that closed the topic for the time being.

Bruce was confident he would come around. David's reputation was as a pianist, but he was also a gifted conductor. Directing such a festival might place him in the running to lead the New York Philharmonic should Mitropoulos ever pass the baton. In any case it was crucial that his festival nab somebody whose prestige could attract musicians to play as well as the public's attention. And only fair, even as Bruce claimed his freedom, that David have a consolation prize.

That there was more to it — his need, even while dropping David, to keep him near, the better to torment him — no one needed to know.

"Special Agent Nolan wishes to speak with you."

Standing at angles to each other, Nolan and Goddard boxed him in, the younger's pelvis thrust out, body arched like a bow pulled to highest tension.

"What can I do for you?" Bruce asked affably.

"It's not for *us* —" began Nolan.

"— but for your *country*," Goddard finished.

"And what does that mean?"

Disgust clenching his features, Nolan declared, "Two nights ago you were arrested at a place for perverts in Greenwich Village." Nickel-and-dime turned to look out the window.

"Apparently you know all about it."

"Disposition of the case?"

"Desk ticket for disorderly conduct," Bruce said shortly. "I'll pay a fine at my arraignment."

The younger man relaxed, the bow going slack as the arrow hit its mark, and both sat down again, as did Bruce.

"Mr. Harnes, we're not here about *that*," said Goddard, leaning forward, "but in connection with your relations with Dora Berlin."

This was surprising. "Why would Mrs. Berlin interest your Bureau?"

Nolan answered, "Given her ties to the Soviet Union—"

"*What!*" Bruce was astonished.

"Oh, yes," Nolan told him. "Twenty years ago she had a love affair with a *Russian*, until Uncle Joe personally intervened."

"Plus, she was married to a *Jew*—" put in Goddard.

"Now, listen here—"

"—and her daughter to a *Hungarian*."

"Look here, Mrs. Berlin's as distinguished a lady as we have," said Bruce, "not excepting Eleanor Roosevelt." Better not to have mentioned Eleanor Roosevelt. "One grandfather was Lincoln's Minister to Paris, the other a Union Army general. For

goodness' sake, her stepfather's Churchill's *cousin!*"

Better not to have mentioned Churchill.

"*Churchill,*" sneered Goddard.

"Mrs. Berlin travels in circles that include Russkis, Jews, Commies, Brits and queers," Nolan summed up. "Given the present climate, we need your help."

The present climate of hysteria, he meant, Americans convinced that liberals—abetted by queers (etc.)—were bent on handing the country over to Stalin. Truman, President until the week before, boasted of purging hundreds of homosexuals from the State Department.

"Gentlemen—" Bruce began deprecatingly.

Goddard interrupted. "With your police record, Mr. Harnes, you'd be well advised to cooperate."

"Ah." There they were: Already Bruce was being blackmailed—and by a little faggot. Kafkaesque! Orwellian!

"Call it cultural counter-espionage," suggested Nolan. "It's a matter of national security that we monitor Mrs. Berlin."

"Bruce, you must agree," Nickel-and-dime said flatly, revolving towards his weathervanes.

"Inform on my new boss?" His old one shrugged.

"Special Agent Goddard will be your contact," Nolan said as the other handed him a card bearing a telephone number. "You are Confidential Informant DB-2. Call every week, and he'll set a meeting. If you don't call, he'll find *you*."

Bruce studied the card. "And Confidential Informant DB-1? Who might that be?"

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The agents looked askance at each other, but said nothing.

Bruce didn't see that he had a choice. Not to mention that his train wouldn't wait.

So did they give him anything in the way of tradecraft to go with his code name? Any training, any hints that might have helped prevent the catastrophe to come?

No, nothing at all.

On the way out he stopped at his desk—already cleared—to grab the suitcase he kept under it, and used the phone to call the Palmer House; David was scheduled to play the next evening with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. He was at rehearsal, but Bruce dictated the message of his arrival in the morning, and ran to Grand Central.

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ISBN: 978-1-63492-732-1

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